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ABSTRACT

Wesley College, a private urban secondary school, established a rural campus in the small town of Clunes, Victoria (Australia), where ninth-grade students could spend a term in a community-based, experientially-derived curriculum to enhance their sense of self and community. A study examined the extent to which Clunes community members regarded Wesley College as having integrated into the community and contributed to it. Surveys were conducted with 50 community members, 44 businesses, and 20 adolescents, and Wesley teachers in Clunes and other key informants were interviewed. Community members felt that the school was making a positive contribution to social life in Clunes and that social mixing between school and community members was occurring. The school was considered to be improving the town's economic situation and business opportunities. The school's contribution to learning opportunities for community members was evidenced by increased use of knowledge, skills, and talents in Clunes. However, the community did not feel that the school's resort-style buildings added to the attractiveness or the heritage environment of Clunes, or that they fit in with the rural setting of the township. Community views were evenly split as to whether the school was helping to link different groups in Clunes as a result of community-based activities of Wesley students. (TD)

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Who's Owning Whom and Why Does It Matter? – Looking at Learning as Community Development

Doug Lloyd and Tamara Downey

(AARE 2001, LLO01457)

Abstract

What processes occur when students from a large private city school live and learn in a small rural community?

This paper documents a part of an educational and social experiment where year nine students from Wesley College in Melbourne spend eight weeks in a residential learning village in the country town of Clunes. The research focuses on the nature of the school-community partnership and the economic, social and environmental impact of the school on the town.

Established in 2000, Wesley College in Clunes is a new community development. Can what was once almost a ghost town become a community rich in learning? Learning communities are seen as a way to a more sustainable future for our communities, especially rural ones (Kilpatrick, 2000).

Schools can also be investigated as a way of understanding what is happening in all sectors of rural and remote community life (Sidoti, 2000). Wesley College in Clunes offers a new way of looking at school-community partnerships and the preliminary findings of the research show the extent to which college and community interact and own each other. Moreover, the extent to which this interaction influences the sustainability of Clunes via learning is also explored in the findings.

Background

Wesley College, one of Australia's largest private colleges, has operated a campus in a small central Victorian town, Clunes, since the beginning of 2000. Approximately 100 year 9 students leave any one of Wesley's three metropolitan Melbourne campuses to spend eight weeks in their residential village in the centre of Clunes joining the ~800 'households' in the rural community ~150 km from Melbourne. As recently as 1994, a tourist guidebook described this historic gold mining hamlet as a ghost town.

Figures 1 and 2 provide a panoramic image of a small part of Clunes now (November 2001) and prior to the construction of the residential village respectively.

Figure 1. Panoramic view of part of Clunes, showing Wesley College village, Nov. 2001

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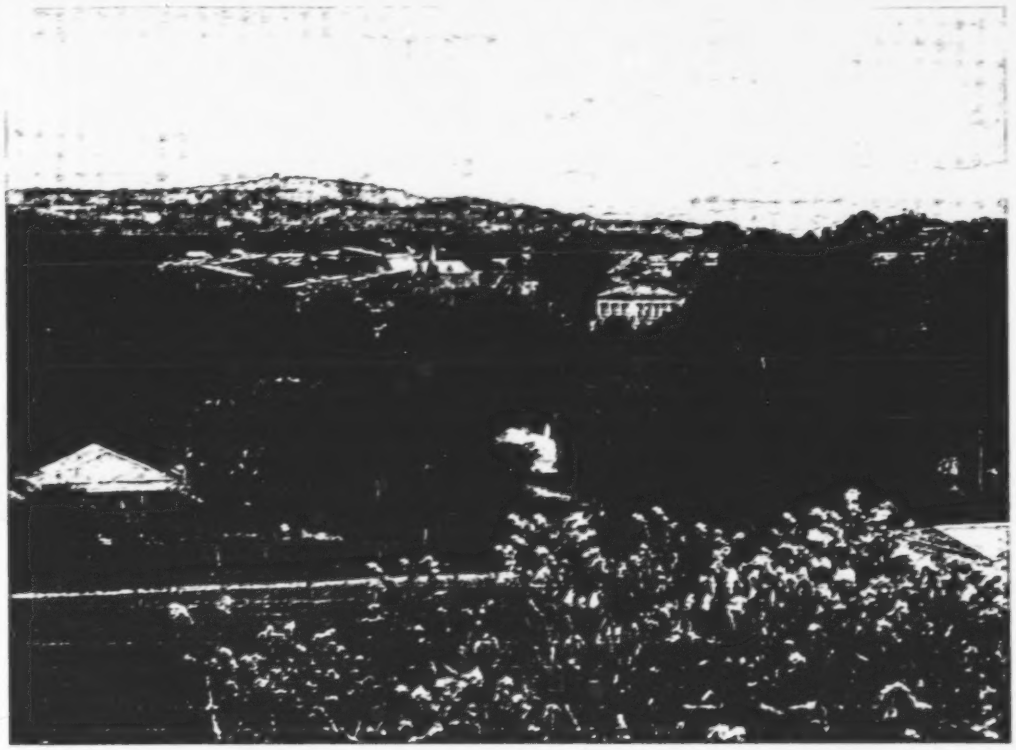
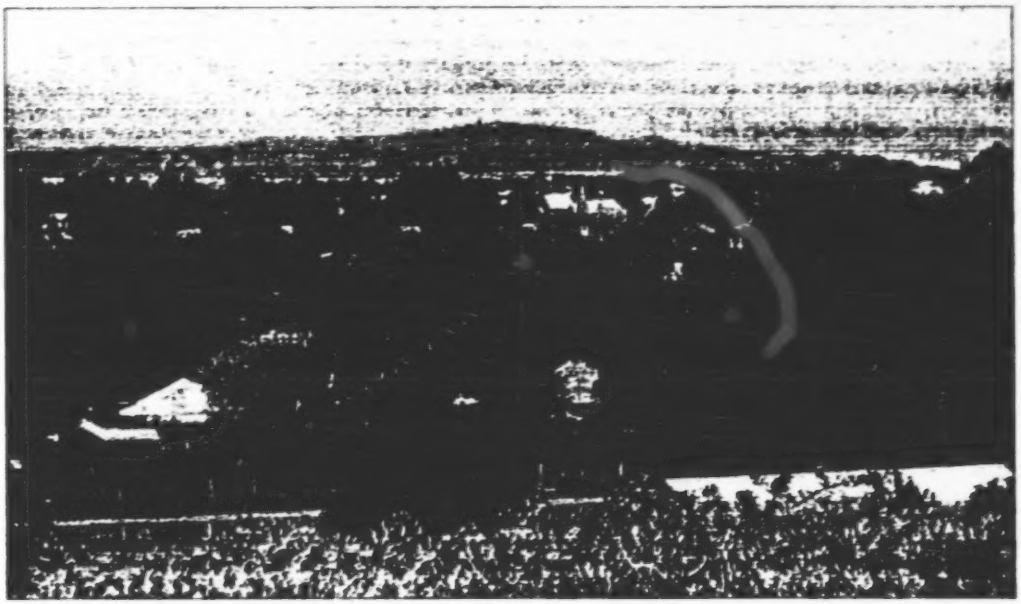


Figure 2. Panoramic view of part of Clunes, pre-Wesley College's village



Wesley College's interest is in a rural location where a majority of its year 9 students can spend some time in a community-based experientially-derived curriculum to enhance their sense of self, particularly their sense of community and their role in communities. The Clunes community and its Shire have accepted Wesley's initiative and ongoing presence as a contributor to Clunes' development and

sustainability.

A partnership has developed between Wesley and the University of Ballarat to enhance the understandings of the learning and curriculum associated with this 'natural experiment', and to assess the sustainability of the venture and mutual benefits for the University, College and Clunes community. Elements of the partnership do or may include researching the 'experiment', curriculum development, staff development, community development, and collaborative course development.

This is one of three 'work-in-progress' papers describing aspects of the research element of the partnership. It explores the extent to which Clunes community members regard Wesley College as having integrated into the community and contributed to it, and some elements of those questions that look to the future of the relationship. The study is expected to establish a snapshot of the evolution of the venture, providing baseline data and a potential indicator of the state of the relationship and its sustainability. Two other 'work-in-progress' papers being presented at this conference consider preliminary results of the study of Wesley students' learning (Lloyd and McDonough, 2001, LLO01455) and broader perspectives on the emerging relationship between Clunes and Wesley College (Lloyd, Downey and McDonough, 2001, LLO01400). Elaborations of each of these subjects and others will be presented when more detailed analyses are completed.

Data Collection and Analysis

Surveys have been used to collect and assess the views of the Clunes community members concerning how they see the economic, social, environmental and 'cultural' impacts of Wesley College on the community. The survey was conducted in three rounds: a stratified random sample of Clunes community members (n=50, 100% return); Clunes businesses listed in the telephone directory (n=44, 88% return); and a snowball sample of 14-16 year old adolescents (n=20). Wesley teachers in Clunes, and a selection of (other) key informants were interviewed using semi-structured interview techniques. Surveys used a combination of five point likert scales and provision for open-ended comments. The latter were used in many of the responses. Only those data derived from the first group are discussed in this paper.

Survey and interview schedule construction, and analysis of the results in the latter study have been based on themes derived from the following bodies of literature: social capital (Coleman, 1988; Kilpatrick, Bell and Falk, 1999; Putman, 1993); community development (Ife, 1996; Sidoti, 2000); and learning communities (Chapman, 1997; Kilpatrick, 2000). In these preliminary stages of analysis, elements of the overall analytical framework include those derived from Wesley College's primary intentions in locating the campus in Clunes (Loader, 1997; *Wesley's Wider World*, 1999) and the philosophical base on which the approach is developed (Bell and Newby, 1971; Tonnies, 1957; Young, 1990). The development of further analytical tools is still in progress.

Results and discussion

According to members of the Clunes community, Wesley College is contributing as follows in the areas identified below:

Social life in the town

- Making a positive contribution to social life in Clunes (58%)
- Social mixing of Wesley College and Clunes community members (58%)
- Social relationships and/or friendships are being formed between Wesley College and Clunes people (48%).

Economy and employment

- Improving the economic situation in Clunes (68%)
- Improving business opportunities in Clunes (56%)
- Increasing job numbers in Clunes (36%). A significant minority (28%) disagree.

Learning opportunities and capability development in the town

- Contributing to learning opportunities for people in Clunes (40%)
- The use of knowledge, skills and talents in Clunes is increasing with the presence of Wesley College (34%).

These community-derived results are positive signs for Wesley's presence in Clunes, particularly considering both the brief period over which the College has been operating, and its commitment to long-term participation and refinement of the interaction between the College and community. The potential for creation of additional employment opportunities will be considered elsewhere (Lloyd, Downey and McDonough, 2001, LLO01400).

It is interesting to note that there is relatively little difference between the percentages of people mixing socially and forming social relationships or friendships. Correlation analyses will be necessary to show if this is an indication of a relatively high degree of receptivity (at least in this sample) or transfer of social contact to friendships or similar social relationship.

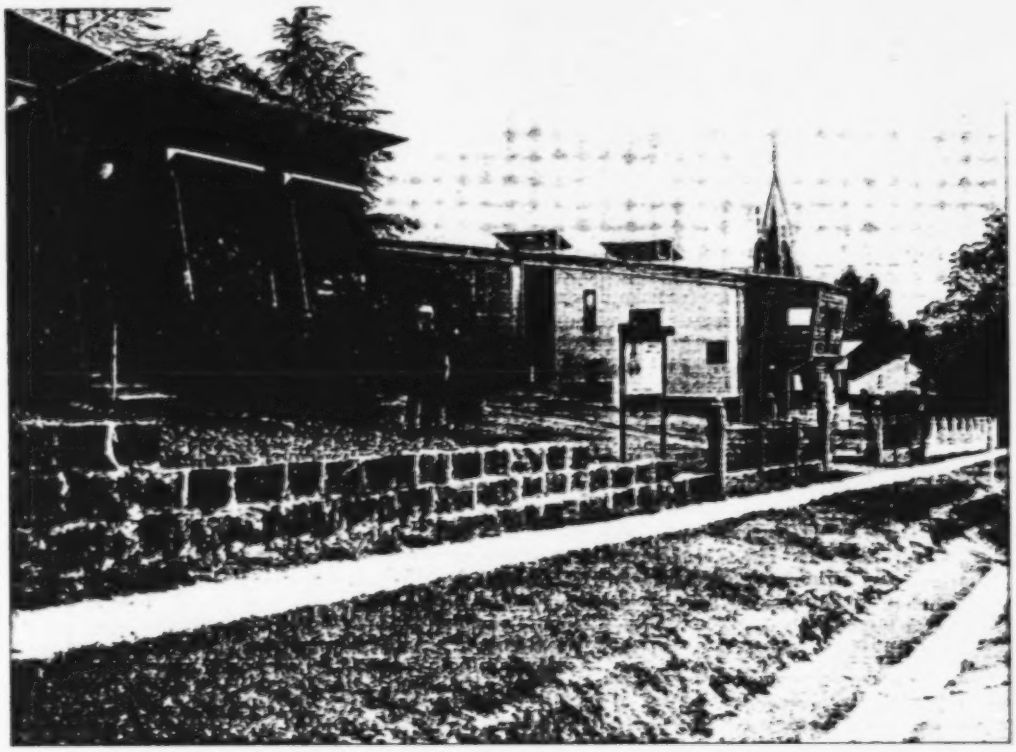
It is also interesting to note the relatively high degree of acceptance of Wesley into the lives of Clunes community members. This conclusion can be reached from the relatively high percentage of knowledgeable responses (positive and negative) and positive response rates (agreeing or strongly agreeing with the above). These are from a random sample of the population of Clunes, in the town and its surrounding parts that include farming community members where in a community of 800 households, such a high percentage of knowledgeable responses is not necessarily expected. In none of the questions does a neutral or 'do not know' response constitute a majority. Some of this 'knowing enough to provide an opinion', often followed by elaborating comments, can be explained by the nature of the rural community, and some from the high levels of publicity afforded to this significant local initiative.

The community's view of Wesley's impact on the built environment is negative on balance, as demonstrated by the following responses:

- The Wesley buildings add to the overall attractiveness of Clunes (34%), while a majority (52%) disagree
- The heritage environment of the town is enhanced by the Wesley buildings (22%), while half disagree
- The Wesley buildings fit in with the rural setting of the Clunes township (26%), while a majority (54%) disagree.

This result is consistent with the debate that exists over the 'resort village-style' dwellings associated with the campus. Figure 3 provides an image of the entrance to the village (November 2001).

Figure 3: A view of the streetscape at the entrance to the Wesley College village



A final result that is worth comment in this preliminary analysis relates to the community's view of the role the Wesley students play in the community via their community-based experiential curriculum. The community is evenly divided on whether

- Wesley is helping to link different groups in Clunes as a result of activities of the Wesley students (23% agree, 23% disagree)

The positive responses are encouraging for the College's aspirations and development of the community. The range of opinion requires further analysis before meaningful comment can be offered. This is an issue and area that requires some attention to obviate exacerbation of any damaging effects and/or perceptions.

Wesley College's presence in Clunes is an unusual example of a major initiative in a small country town contributing to rural or small town development, because it originated with Wesley College. More usually, a town or region will seek mutually beneficial business or infrastructure opportunities, having first created a plan for increased economic development, most likely, and/or social and cultural activity or infrastructure. This would normally provide the town with a strong sense of ownership over, or control (and/or influence) over the development. This issue is discussed in some detail in the companion paper to this presentation (Lloyd, Downey and McDonough, 2001).

Conclusions

In the early stages of Wesley College's operation of its rural campus, these preliminary results indicate that there will be benefit from further consideration and/or discussion of the curriculum in order that any intended integrating influences associated with students' work in the community is clarified or enhanced.

On a broader level, indications are that a positive contribution is being made to Clunes' social capital

and infrastructure, economic sustainability and its citizens' learning opportunities. These findings have significant implications for the mid- and long-term development of the Clunes community. They provide a good basis for discussions within the community on how the benefits can be enhanced and/or better distributed and disseminated. They also provide leads on how their effects may be used as starting points for new and/or enhanced relationships that are designed to improve the mutual benefits resulting from Wesley College's presence in Clunes.

Some of these conclusions, particularly those related to the interaction between Wesley College and the Clunes community, will be discussed further in the companion session that considers broader perspectives on the emerging relationship between the two, and (further) implications for its evolution.

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